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## Redefining our Existence: An Argument for Short- and Long-term Goals and Objectives

*Robert W. Barnett*

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In his January, 1995 *Writing Lab Newsletter* column, “Writing Center Ethics: Questioning Our Own Existence,” Michael Pemberton warns that it is “time to take a hard look at what we do, why we do it, and how we can justify it to people who might be looking to us as expendable budget items in tough—and getting tougher—economic times” (8). While not all writing centers are facing economic hardships, I agree with Pemberton that the time has come for some serious self-reflection.

The time has also come to move beyond the stories that define our existence within our own writing centers and within the writing center community. Such internal definition is valuable in the evolution of individual writing centers, but the fact remains that we are not all the same. In Darwinian terms, we are all members of the same species, but we don’t share the same physical features and we don’t all socialize with the outside world in the same manner. Because we all exist in highly specialized environments, I believe we need also to define ourselves vis-à-vis these environments as we formulate and administer our own policies. In the process, we will inevitably create a new era of stories which better clarify our roles within our institutions. As Pemberton notes, “It is important for all people who work in writing centers and think of them as important, effective, and ethical sites for learning to be able to rationalize—for anybody at any time—the benefits of what we do” (8).

One step that many writing centers have already taken in this direction

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is to create mission statements, which they distribute to faculty and administrators. Several writing center colleagues have shared their statements with me, and one commonality I have noticed is a determination to become more visible, to be taken more seriously in the larger academic arena. I don't mean to suggest here that we start a mass exodus toward the writing center promised land, because many in our field would respond with a loud chorus of "Include me out!" Not every writing center administrator shares the ambition to move toward the center of the university curriculum. North, for example, makes it perfectly clear that he does not want to participate in the "romanticization of the writing center's institutional potential, [which] may actually mask its complicity in what Elspeth Stuckey has called the violence of literacy" ("Revisiting" 15). Others less cynical than North see a move toward the center as too much work, or they may simply choose to stay out of the institutional spotlight. I don't agree with North's nonparticipatory stance, but I have come to realize that socialization patterns between writing centers and their institutions are as diverse as the very missions that drive each center. In this light, mission statements are important for broadly defining the philosophy of writing centers. I also believe, though, that a document more comprehensive than the mission statement—outlining writing center philosophies, pedagogies and campus services—is vital for those attempting to move into the mainstream of the larger university community. In fact, at the University of Michigan-Flint, our existence as a valued component of students' education depends on it.

In addition to the already-tried approaches to justifying the benefits of our writing center, I have found that creating a statement of short- and long-term goals and objectives not only works to legitimize our curricular positioning in the academy, but also addresses important political, theoretical, and rhetorical questions pertaining to our top priority—helping students become better writers. In sharing my story, I hope to illustrate the rewards, opportunities, challenges, and dangers that have presented themselves in the process, all of which contribute to my belief that a promising future does exist for writing centers. As North, Ede, Riley, and countless others have pointed out, we all have compelling stories. Some are inspirational and offer hope, while others paint a bleaker picture of our existence. The best ones, however, provide clear warning signs that should not be ignored. In "Priorities and Guidelines for the Development of Writing Centers," for example, Bene Scanlon Cox cautions that

the absence of clear priorities and guidelines for future development is a major problem because the staff of each center must rely largely on its own experience and knowledge to provide the rationale to direct services and even to justify survival. Progress towards solving these problems lies in approaching systematically and collectively the priorities for future functions of writing centers. (77)

In a climate of diminishing budgets, accountability, student retention, and sweeping curricular changes, creating a goals and objectives statement has given our writing center a clear advantage because, in addition to establishing ourselves as a necessary and important component of a university education, we now have a short-term and long-term plan for the center's operation that "systematically and collectively" illustrates our priorities. Such a plan becomes particularly significant when justifying the need for more and better space, a larger operating budget, state-of-the-art computer technology, and so on. If deans and provosts see a clear and positive direction for our writing centers, a direction that benefits students and faculty, then they are more likely to invest time and money in our efforts.

In its present form, the goals and objectives statement for UM-Flint's writing center is a lengthy eight pages. It contains the major goals of the center and a list of more specific objectives for attaining each goal. Further, I have included the many tasks that clearly demonstrate how to reach the goals (see Appendix I). For the purpose of this article, I have condensed the goals and objectives statement into a list which includes the more comprehensive goals from the original document (see Appendix II).

### **Student Retention**

Two particular commitments included in our goals and objectives have helped convince the administration that our writing center deserves a promising future: 1) student retention, and 2) collaboration with faculty and staff across the curriculum. In the university's academic plan, a formal statement outlining the issues needing wide-spread attention in order to strengthen our institution, these components continually surfaced. After a close reading of the 1995 Academic Plan, I am convinced that our writing center and the administration are mutually dependent; we need each other's support to improve the university's student retention efforts. The following excerpt from the section of the document, titled "Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation of Students," illustrates my point:

Faculty and staff need to work together to promote a campus culture in which student learning goes beyond classroom contact hours. . . . Faculty and staff need to receive support to enable them to assume more responsibility for helping students learn how to learn. . . . We should also establish formal mechanisms for assisting students likely to encounter academic difficulty. Remedial and tutorial services are critical, and their effectiveness should be regularly assessed. (39)

Other, more specific recommendations call for "enhanced support services addressing the needs of our students" and "increased mentoring." Admittedly, our motivations are not the same—the administration is preoccupied

with keeping students' tuition money coming in, while our aim is to bring about long-term change in students' writing abilities for the purpose of helping them succeed in college and thus remain in college—but our combined efforts can produce positive results. In his 1989 article, "Misconceptions Mar Campus Discussions of Student Retention," Vincent Tinto, then director of the Cultural Foundations of Education Program at Syracuse University, reveals what he sees as the true nature of effective student retention efforts: "Although keeping students in college is a natural by-product of a successful operation, such programs focus first and foremost on ways to insure that all students, not just some, have an opportunity to learn as much as possible while they are in college, regardless of whether they decide to stay or leave" (B2). What better way to ensure that all students are at least offered the help they need with their writing skills than to rely on the services of the campus writing center? After all, helping students improve themselves as writers and as critical thinkers is essential to their academic success. In "What the Writing Center is—and Isn't," Richard Leahy corroborates what writing center personnel have always said. Defending the integrity of writing centers, he says, "They welcome students who come with just an assignment and no idea where to start, with some scribbled notes or an outline, or with a completed draft. They also want to work with all writers, even the strongest ones" (44).

The writing center at the University of Michigan-Flint is no exception. Our cross-curricular design allows all students in all disciplines at all levels to receive the same tutorial assistance. In addition, all first-semester students take an English placement exam, which determines the freshman composition course they must take. Those who score below Composition I or Composition II on the written exam are placed into English 109, a three-credit developmental writing course that includes four hours of contact with a writing center tutor each week. Since the developmental writing program is primarily administered through the writing center, a program which accommodates several hundred underprepared students each semester, the administration can ill-afford to ignore our importance. And since the writing center works with drop-in students from 30–40 different departments, a large number of writers from across campus rely on us to help them succeed in the academy. Statistics such as these send a clear message to higher administration that students value, in fact depend on, our existence. It is no accident, then, that two of the seven goals in our goals and objectives statement specifically address student retention issues:

Assist all students in advancing their writing abilities and critical thinking skills in relation to their university education and in preparation for their respective careers.

Maintain and enhance the quality of the English Department's

Developmental Writing program as it pertains to the Writing Center to more effectively facilitate students' learning processes.

These statements may smack of ambition and dedication to the cause, but alone they are not enough to convince the higher-ups that we are committed to helping retain students through collaborative peer tutoring. It is also necessary to include specific tasks which, when executed, will help accomplish the initial goal(s). For example, our center offers tutoring for writers at any level, including first-year students, advanced writers, and graduate students. We train and staff our tutors to accommodate not just freshman writers, but all writers, which is important to faculty and administrators who traditionally view the writing center as a remedial stopping place for bad writers. Spelling out what we do and who we help has changed the negative stereotype of our office away from that of a "grammar garage" or "fix-it shop," and it has helped educate those who can contribute, financially and politically, to advancing our cause.

Ours is an urban, commuter campus, and most students work an average of 35 hours per week, which means the traditional 9-5 university schedule does not always give them a chance to take full advantage of their college experience. I announced in our goals statement that the writing center would expand its hours to include evenings and weekends so that students would have more opportunities to seek out help with their writing. This impressed the administration because, as our Dean pointed out to me in a memo, we were structuring our office in a way that would maximize students' chances to succeed. In the end, our budget was expanded to include an extra \$1,500 for spring and summer tutoring which, until our goals and objectives statement was circulated, had never even been considered.

## **Collaboration With Faculty**

Mark Waldo, in "The Last Best Place for Writing Across the Curriculum: The Writing Center," argues that an institution's commitment to a strong writing across the curriculum program must necessarily include a commitment to the writing center. Waldo proposes "a home for WAC on middle ground, between the open space of dialogue and the cloister of English department control. This home needs a physical location well-known to faculty and students, situated in some central, easily accessible part of campus" (20). Waldo's comments are significant because in calling for writing centers to coordinate WAC programs he has helped strengthen the argument for the permanence of writing centers. Steven North, in his 1984 article "The Idea of a Writing Center," pleads with colleagues for understanding and respect, to clarify what writing center directors and staff do. Waldo, convinced that we have to some extent already accomplished North's goal, uses the idea of faculty collaboration to further pressure administrators

to increase their commitment to the writing center's role in the university curriculum.

Though I don't fully share Waldo's belief that writing centers alone should "house" WAC, the importance he places on faculty collaboration is fundamental to the success of any writing center. As Vincent Tinto notes, "The more faculty members interact with and become engaged with students, the more likely students are to stay in college" (B2). Linking student learning with student retention, he claims that "students who report rewarding contacts with faculty members are also the ones who make the greatest gains in learning and are the most likely to complete their degrees" (B2).

At the University of Michigan-Flint, the writing center has taken steps to help improve the lines of communication between faculty and students, as the examples below illustrate. The point here, though, is that while Tinto's comments do not factor writing centers into the student learning/faculty contact/student retention equation, writing centers can help strengthen the student/faculty connection. Moreover, faculty outreach has been important to our writing center, contributing to a rapid, short-term increase in student visits. I've learned that clearly defining the writing center vis-à-vis the academy is dependent on our commitment to work closely with colleagues across the disciplines, a commitment expressed in our own goals and objectives statement.

Develop the existing partnership between the writing center and the Writing Across the Curriculum program to encourage faculty involvement.

Continue increasing collaborative work with and accommodate the needs of all faculty.

As co-director of our Writing Across the Curriculum committee, a position I share with our Composition Director, I collaborate with colleagues in a number of capacities. Our discipline-based WAC program empowers individual faculty members to incorporate writing into their classes that fits their specific course agendas. Each discipline has its own purposes for writing and creates its own set of values for its discourse community. Acting as facilitator, my task, then, is to help instructors create writing assignments that reflect the purposes and values of their own disciplines and that allow them to use writing as an important tool for learning. Assuming a rhetorically neutral position, I am able to consult with faculty on assignment design, evaluation, and grading criteria. Along the way, the writing center has developed close relationships with several disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and math because we provide tutoring for students as writing becomes more prominent in their courses. An increasingly open system of communication has evolved, helping to build an important level of trust between faculty and the writing center, and, we hope, between faculty and

students. Cultivating collaborative efforts with the disciplines has elevated the writing center (and its mission of bringing writing to the heart of the university curriculum) to respectable status. Not only are we working to educate the campus about the importance of writing as a way to enhance critical thought and students' abilities to succeed in the academy, but the writing center is becoming disentangled from its stereotypical image of a remedial haven for "bad" writers and redefined as a major player in the politics of education.

The writing center's involvement with faculty, though, runs much deeper at UM-Flint. The relationship between writing center tutors, students, and instructors is often obscured by a lack of communication, especially between tutors and instructors. Students who visit the writing center act as liaisons, interpreting instructors' writing assignments for their tutors, explaining what the instructors want them to accomplish. Sometimes the explanations are clear and accurate, but more often tutors become the end participants in a game of writing assignment "telephone." To establish a more open line of communication, and thus a better system for helping students revise their papers, I initiated a writing center Faculty Assignment Drawer (F.A.D.). At the beginning of each semester I send memos and e-mail messages to all faculty, inviting those who use assignment sheets in their classes to submit them to the writing center. Assignment sheets are organized by department and kept on file as reference material for writing center tutors. So, for example, when a psychology student comes to the center for help on a research paper, her tutor can pull the instructor's assignment sheet from the file and in a matter of minutes know exactly what the student needs to accomplish. If the tutor clearly understands the requirements for the assignment, she can quickly focus on the needs of both student and instructor and maximize the quality and quantity of tutorial help she is able to give. Using the F.A.D. in this manner has helped reassure faculty that tutors working with their students are making every effort to preserve the integrity of their assignments by understanding and reinforcing their specific requirements. And as more faculty take advantage of the WAC program, the relationship between tutors, students, and instructors becomes less obscure. Faculty support continues to grow as a result of this and several other collaborative initiatives, sending a clear message to the rest of the university that good writing needs to be an important part of the curriculum and that the writing center should play a central role in helping students become better writers.

### **Toward Defining Our Existence:**

As many writing centers continue the never-ending struggle to convince their institutions that they are more than marginal facilities catering to marginalized students, we need to take another step back and again re-

evaluate our own existence. Why do we exist? What exactly do we intend to accomplish? Who in our institutions do we really want to reach, and for what purpose(s)? How much are we actually contributing to the development of student writing? What impact does our existence have on the rest of the campus community? Can we justify our existence to those who control our budgets? The answers to some of these questions may not be much different than they were five or ten years ago. Some are, however, and placing writing center issues squarely under the academic microscope may offer our best hope for finding institutional permanence.

Goals and objectives statements, I believe, can only help that cause. In addition to defining the writing center “self,” a well-written goals and objectives statement will also define necessary relationships with the entire university community and with the local community and local schools, and it will define and encourage relationships with other writing centers. Working on all of these fronts is no small task, but my experience has taught me that gradual and well-planned implementation of both short- and long-term goals will produce significant results. History paints a clear picture of the impressive evolution of writing centers, both theoretically and pedagogically. Writing centers today are an important part of that history and must continue making progress toward what I see as our ultimate goal—to bring writing to the center of the university curriculum.

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## APPENDIX I

### EXCERPT FROM GOALS AND OBJECTIVES STATEMENT

**Goal 1:** Assist all students in advancing their writing abilities and critical thinking skills in relation to their university education and in preparation for their respective careers.

**Objectives:**

1) Maintain and improve collaborative tutoring for writers at any level, including first-year students, advanced writers, and graduate students in any course across the curriculum.

—Continue offering individualized group tutoring on a drop-in basis and establish blocks of time for tutoring by appointment.

—Implement small-group tutoring within the center.

—Offer group tutoring in courses where writing is assigned.

—Enhance the on-line tutoring provided in the center.

—Expand hours of operation to include Sunday evenings.

—Continue collecting instructors' assignments and work to increase the number of participating instructors.

2) Work collaboratively with other units on campus to provide services that illustrate the importance of writing, both in the academy and in the work environment.

—Offer Writing Center/Cooperative Education and Career Center staff workshops on résumé/cover letter/interview preparation to enhance the assistance that both offices provide for students

—Establish a partnership with the Computer-Assisted Writing Classroom to assist students with on-line composing and collaborative peer tutoring.

—Work closely with Educational Opportunities Initiatives Office to create additional support for minority and at-risk students.

## APPENDIX II

### MAJOR GOALS OF MICHIGAN-FLINT'S WRITING CENTER

**Goal 1:** Assist all students in advancing their writing abilities and critical thinking skills in relation to their university education and in preparation for their respective careers.

**Goal 2:** Maintain and enhance the quality of the English Department's Developmental Writing program as it pertains to the Writing Center to more effectively facilitate students' learning processes.

**Goal 3:** Enhance the Writing Center's physical and technical facilities for the purpose of effectively and efficiently accommodating the increase in student and faculty use of the facility.

**Goal 4:** Continue increasing the awareness of the Writing Center's presence to students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

**Goal 5:** Enhance the development of Writing Center staff, including student tutors.

**Goal 6:** Develop the existing partnership between the Writing Center and the Writing Across the Curriculum program.

**Goal 7:** Build a more solid network with other writing centers and with the external community (i.e., secondary schools, local Flint community).